

Cruising Canada: Maritimes, Laurences, North Channel

# Sailing

*The Beauty of Sail*

**Test Crew:  
High Marks  
for Najad 332**

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*Rounding the mark in  
the 12-Meter USA*



**Robin Knox-Johnston:  
Alone at Sea Again**

# Voyage Back in Time



**T**he boat settled down around dawn. She'd been bucking like a bull in a rodeo for nearly two days and everyone was feeling it. Even the cook wasn't eating. Our square-rigged vessel was flying two big fore-and-aft sails like a sloop and the boat had sliced the sea with a pretty good heel. It made getting around the already-canted wooden deck a tricky proposition. Spray showered the weather rail, needles of icy water stabbing my face whenever I went topside. It was just us and the water: roiling

## A passage down the St. Lawrence Seaway aboard the Tall Ship *Concordia*

and thundering, spindrift blowing off the face of waves as the boat crashed into the troughs. But the waters had finally become placid.

Following in the wake of Cabot and the Vikings, of Capt. Cook and Cartier, we were about to make landfall in Newfoundland. We had reached the end of our voyage through time, a voyage that began six days ago on a dock in

Quebec City, in a port that has hosted seagoing vessels for 400 years, a port nestled beneath a steep ridge traversed by snaking cobblestone streets that climbed the slopes of Cap Diamant to a limestone facade capped by domered windows, silver tin roofs and a gleaming golden steeple. A stone fortress controlled the western reaches of the ridge overlooking the place where the waters narrow.

Which is no coincidence since Quebec means just that. Champlain adopted the Iroquois word *Kebec*, meaning the place where the waters

By Mark Stevens with photography by Sharon Matthews-Stevens

narrow, in 1608. It seemed like the perfect place to begin a voyage through time. And our tall ship booked through Canadian Sailing Expeditions, the barkentine *Concordia*, was the perfect vessel for our quest for history, sailing us down the St. Lawrence, Canada's most historically significant river, to the sea.

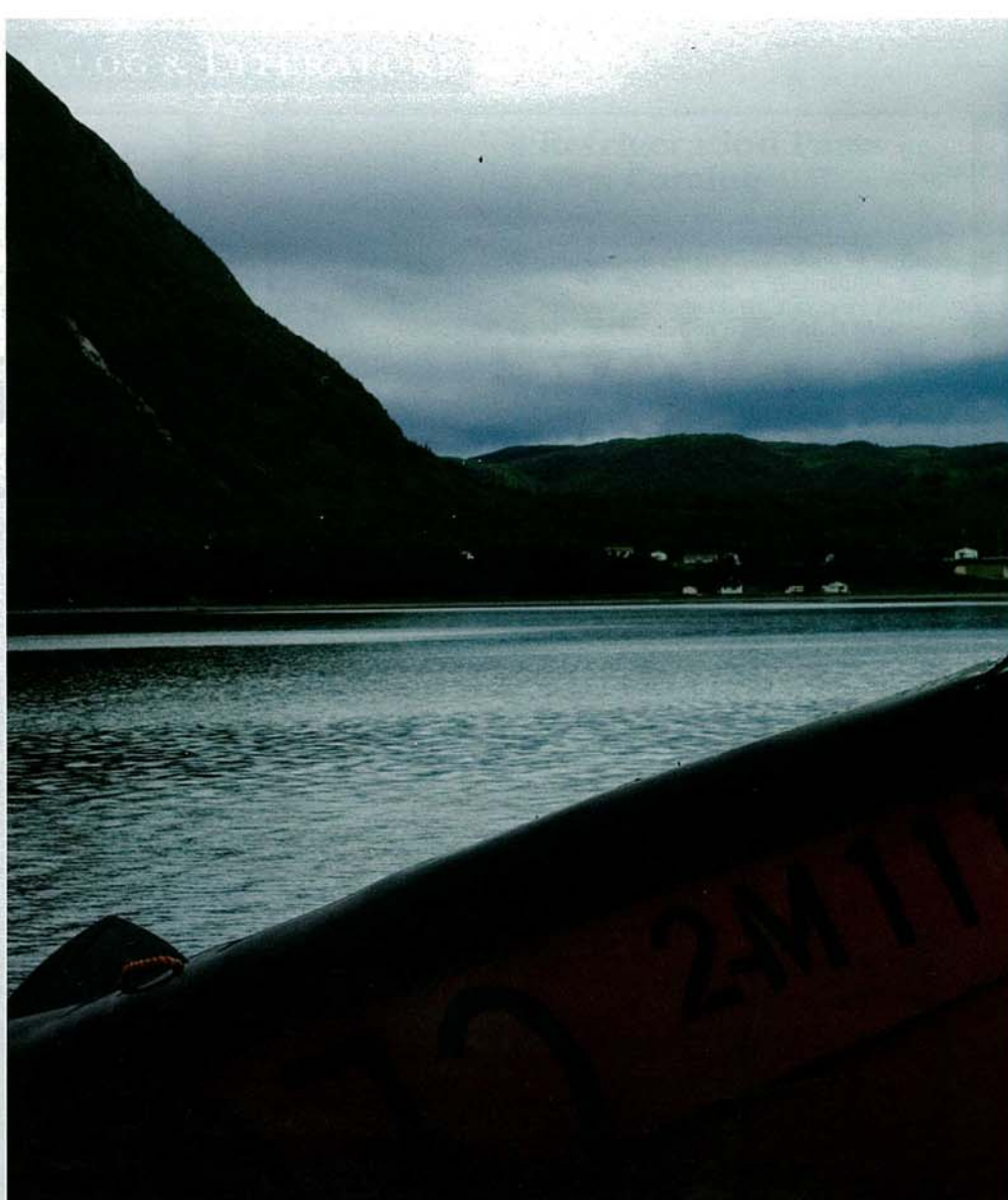
The river stretches more than a thousand miles from its beginning at Lake Ontario to where the waters mingle with the brine of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the biggest estuary in the world. We found the current to be strong here. White veins striated the white surface. Just east of Quebec City the waters opened up, an expanse of blue gray mountains hovering like a mirage above the waterline to the south. The Laurentians, clad in green and blue, marched along the north shore.



Quebec City's streets are the perfect starting point for a voyage through time. A fishing boat rests on the beach at Newfoundland's Lark Harbour, above right. *Concordia* moors at the second last port-of-call, the Bay of Islands at Newfoundland, far right.

We passed the Ile de Orleans dotted with stone farmhouses topped by steep red roofs designed to inconvenience the snows that piled up here in winter. Ribbons of farms stretched back from the river, laid out in Seigniorial grids, harkening back to the European era of feudalism. The call came out somewhere past the Ile de Orleans. "Stand by to brace the topgallants."

I'd been doing my part to enhance the historical significance of this journey. I was sitting on deck reading Patrick O'Brian's **Master and Commander**. Every once in

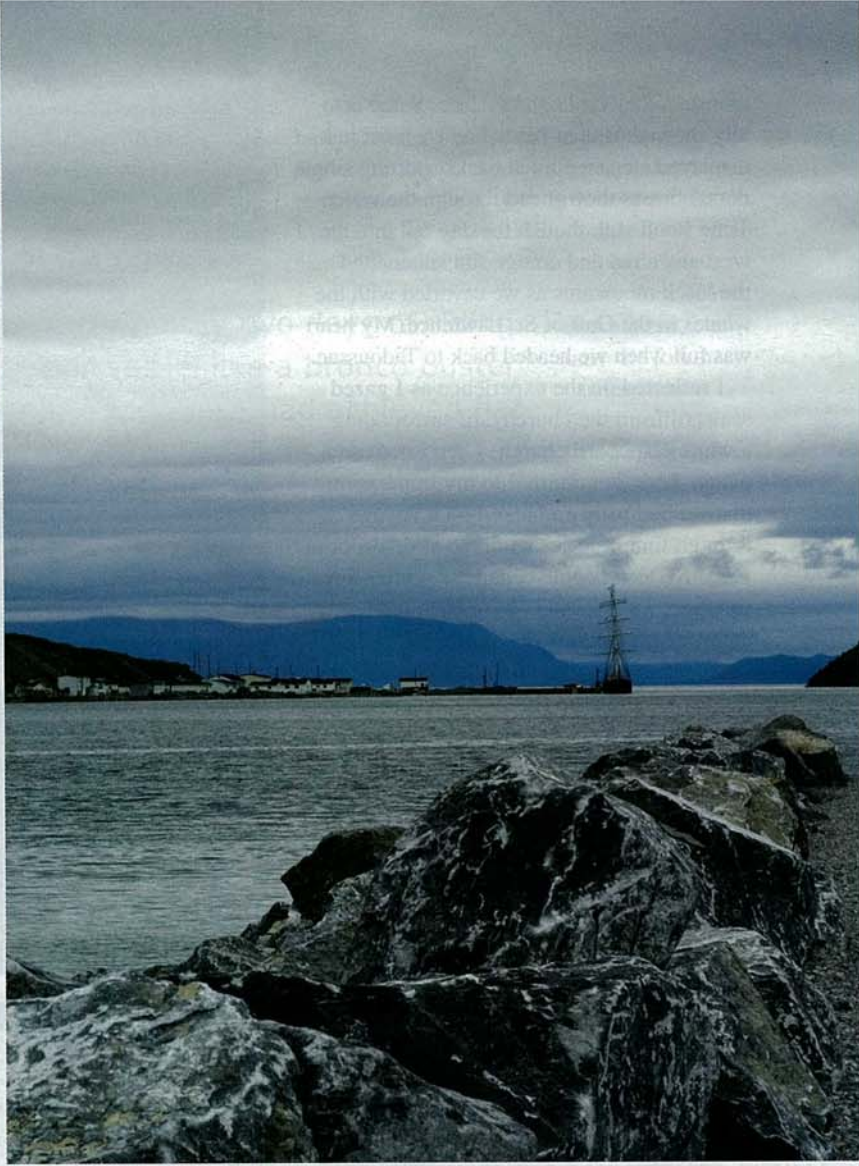
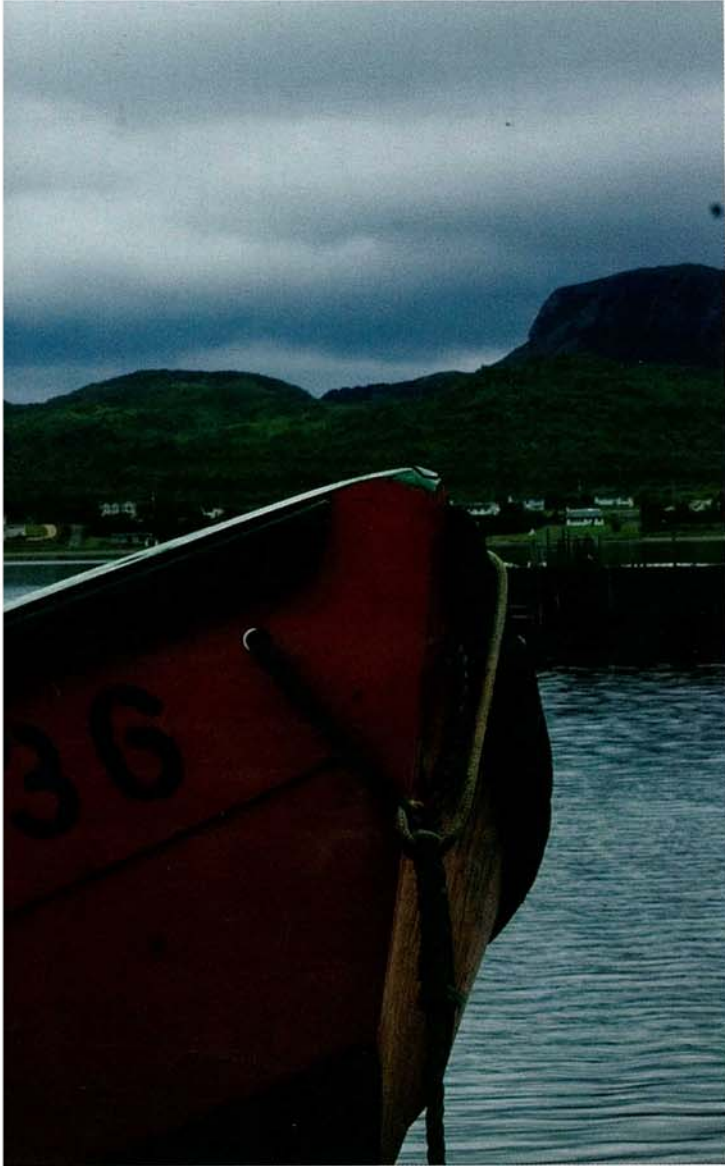


a while I turned to the front of the book to check out the sailplan for Capt. Aubrey's vessel, then looked up to the mast to the five yardarms. This was no mere cruise. On this adventure guests work the boat, hauling lines along with the ship's crew, and mastering sail trim, or taking the helm of *Concordia*. And even as I scanned the yards and lost myself in history, the call came out again in a voice that sounded just like Russell Crowe, "Stand by to brace the topgallant."

We rushed to the ratlines, to belaying pins, to capstans six feet across. Three crewmembers scurried up the mast and scrambled across footlines to balance at the outer ends of the yards. And then we pulled to the call, two, six ... It wasn't so romantic even, though we heard the echoes of calls that have skimmed the waters of the world for centuries. I realized, rough hemp burning the flesh of my hands, that for all the grace of these boats, for all the exhilaration of watching the yards of white canvas billowing topside, it was hard work.

The force was so strong and the pulling so hard that "two" meant someone grasped the line above you and literally tossed themselves into the air so the full weight of their body made some slack in the line, and then on "six," you tugged the slack for dear life, time and time again until the sail was unfurled. Then I looked skyward and felt the boat surge like an anxious thoroughbred as she tasted the wind in her sail. It was so beautiful beneath this sail that it took my breath away. It hit me that four more yardarms awaited our pleasure, even as a voice that roused the ghost of Capt. Bligh reverberated across the deck. "Stand by to brace the yards for tops'l!"

I slept that night like I'd never slept before as the winds carried us east. I lounged in a narrow berth as comfortable as any five-star bed I've slept in. I realized the next morning that for all the pain in my shoulders this was still the experience of a lifetime, for even as the sun flooded the cabin through our porthole I could see it breaking over a tree-sprouted ridge that had to be 2,000 feet high.



Sometime in the night *Concordia* had turned off the St. Lawrence itself and was plying the waters of the Saguenay. I watched the landscape glide silently past the boat, and sipped my morning coffee as I leaned against the starboard rail. Tree-covered mountains fell away to the water from precipices etched out of granite. Orange lichen clung to the stone faces, emerald moss hung suspended above the water. Spruce and pine clawed at the sides of slopes that themselves climbed skyward.

"Benchmark here is 680 meters," said Kim Smith, *Concordia's* first mate, "700 meters." Then he stopped and took a deep breath. "We could just stay here for a week," he said, squinting at the cliffs and monstrous mountains lining the long fjord.

As we turned to the south again we passed a little bay strewn with great boulders and arthritic pines. A lone sloop swung

at anchor at the end of a deep bay. The call came out, "Stand by to brace yards," and we unfurled a single square sail and skimmed the waters past Eternity Bay. We ran before the wind toward the St. Lawrence, the waters of the gulf opening up before our bow. That's when we saw our first whales.

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Belugas cavorted in the bay off our port beam like kids at a playground.

We lowered sails and turned hard to port to approach Tadoussac, a village with red

roofs hugging a green ridge, a village fringed by a crescent beach beneath a stone seawall even now populated by families lounging beneath multicolored umbrellas. Once ashore we immediately booked a whale-watching tour on a rigid-inflatable boat. We donned orange foul weather gear and headed back

out over the water, bouncing over the tidal race and holding on for dear life. We glimpsed a sleek ivory crescent in the water, then another. Belugas surfaced and glanced our way then dove deep. The water was alive with gentle splashes and gleaming pelts. They moved too quickly for pictures, but it didn't matter, for the view was etched in our mind's eye.

The radio crackled and our skipper hit the engine. We headed southwest where another boat had spotted a pod of minke whales. A sudden explosion of spray signaled a breaching leviathan. Like giant sea

monsters they broke the surface. Some actually showed us their black bodies, most just displayed elegant curved backs sporting single dorsal fins as they glided through the water. Time stood still, though the day fell into the west and a red and orange sun silhouetted the black mountains as we cavorted with the whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. My heart was full when we headed back to Tadoussac.

I reflected on the experience as I gazed seaward from the churchyard surrounding a white clapboard church. Then I noticed a plaque here that attested to my impression that we had truly embarked on a voyage through time. Cartier wintered at this spot in 1535. Sixteen people began the winter. Five survived. These waters have been traversed by every explorer of New France.

Our last landfall on mainland North America was Havre St. Pierre, where the mayor and half the town greeted us on the dock to present us with a flag. For here, near land's end, we were better than television. As we stepped ashore I heard villagers laughing and pointing and staring at the boat. "Le Gros Bateau," they said.

Later on, during a short tour of land dominated by muskeg, scrub pine, white rapids



*Concordia sails through foul weather in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, above. The ship docks at Tadoussac, top, and the passengers disembark for a whale-watching trip. The author, right, takes the helm on a rainy day between the mainland and Newfoundland. Madeline, a ship's mate from France, hauls sheets underway, middle right. The mists on the coast of Newfoundland, far right, add a surreal quality to the last leg of the voyage.*





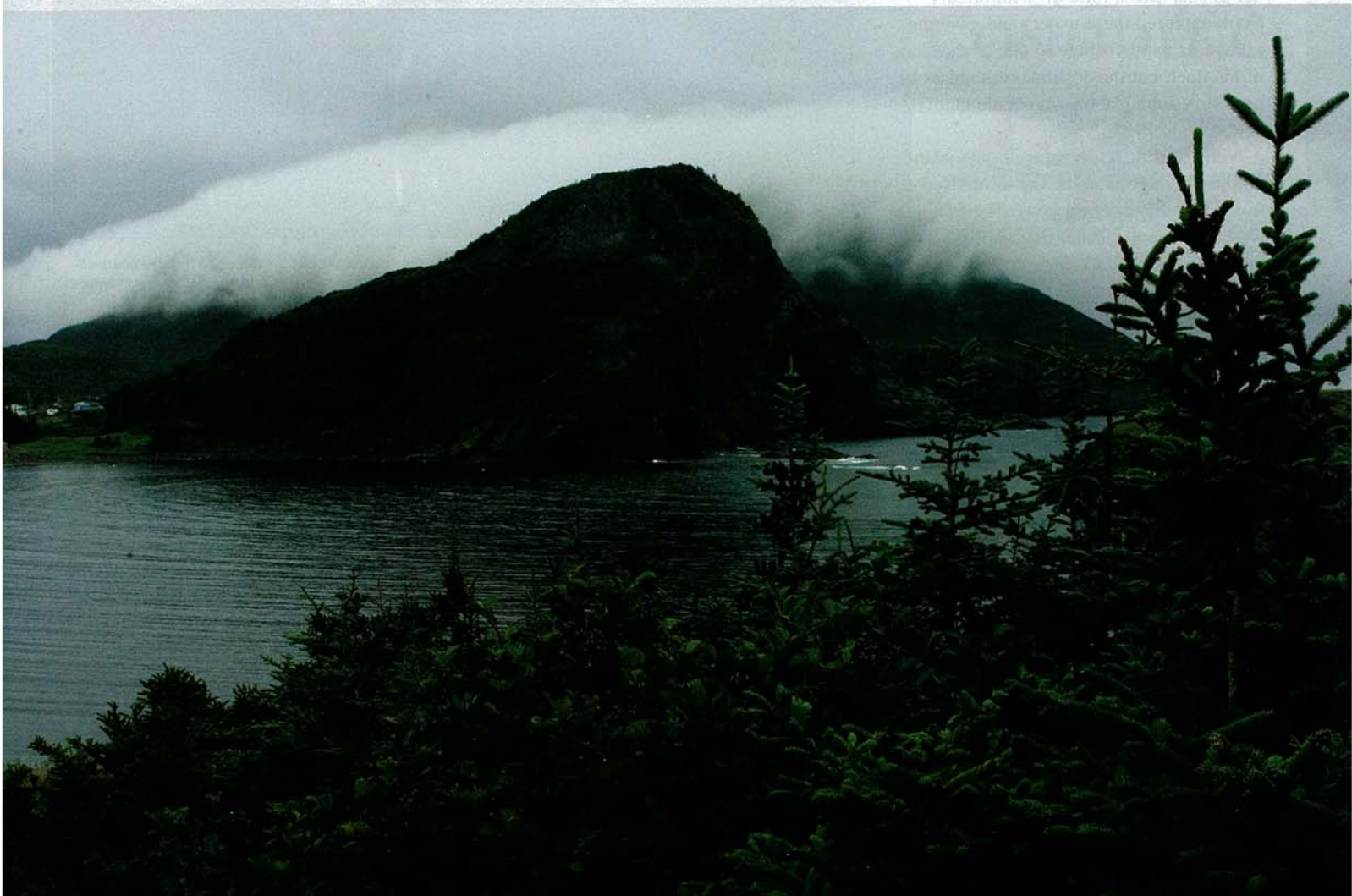
from streams and rivers once famous with America fishermen for the wealth of the salmon traversing their depths, we entered a little Innu village called Mingan, dominated by a gray clapboard church. Oblong mounds of earth were strewn through the rocky soil in the churchyard, sheltered beneath a fluorescent range marker. They were graves. A husky fellow in jeans and a foul weather coat shoveled earth around one grave, his face the color and texture of old leather. Figuring he worked there, I struck up a conversation in really bad French. Turns out his grandfather had carved the pulpit in the church and he was tending the graves of his parents. Somehow we carried on a conversation. I mentioned our boat, "le gros bateau," and a wide grin crossed his face. He laughed out loud and launched into an excited Gallic exposition. "Oui, le gros bateau."

After nearly two days of riding our vessel like a bronco buster in a rodeo we had achieved flat waters. The seas had calmed in Newfoundland's lee. *Concordia* seemed to be floating in a place without time, a place without borders or limits.

Our "gros bateau," is a blue-hulled barkentine, registered in the port of Barbados. Barkentines were particularly popular in the heyday of sail, because pirates liked their maneuverability, particularly when sailing upwind. *Concordia* shipped three

masts, fore, main and mizzen, but only the foremast carries square-rigged sails. The two aft sails are fore-and-aft controlled and sailed like the main of a sloop. The mizzen sail is gaff-rigged, and there is a jib, a storm jib and a flying jib from a bowsprit that juts 30 feet forward from her stem. Her length overall is 188 feet, her beam 31 feet, her draft 13 feet. Masts tower 115 feet over her deck.

Canadian Sailing Expeditions had provided the perfect boat to embark on a voyage through time, and activities on ship included sail trim lessons, history lessons and even



knot-tying sessions. But they'd failed miserably in one aspect of historical verisimilitude. Not once were we served weevily hardtack, tainted salt beef, or offered insect-laden water, though rum provisions were more than ample. In fact, chef Teri McLean, who runs her own inn up in Northern Ontario, served lobster and roasted pork, gourmet sandwiches and amazing dinners. If this voyage lasted any longer, *le gros bateau* might well have been worked by *les gros crew*. I forced myself to make up for this shocking historical inaccuracy by burying myself in **Master and Commander** once the weather hit past Anticosti Island, where we got a taste of real North Atlantic sailing. And some didn't fare so well.

But we had our sea legs by day four or five and, once in the shelter of the Bay of Islands, everyone got a new lease on life—just in time to discover Newfoundland. As if in tribute to our voyage through time, a young man wearing an ermine cloak and felt hat circa 1485 stood on the dock waiting for us as we pulled into Lark Harbour on Newfoundland's west coast.

The mayor explained that the young man was supposed to represent Capt. Cook, but her history was a little off. Admittedly, Cook explored these waters and gave the village its name, tribute to one of the ships of his fleet, but the costume was meant to personify John Cabot, who made landfall here around 1497.

Vikings built settlements on this island 2,000 years ago, making the term "New-found" land a bit of an irony. The title for this gorgeous island first appeared in a charter provided to Cabot in 1496 by Henry VII, who gave him permission "to set up our banner on any new-found land." The name stuck. In spite of the apparent irony, it seemed the ideal landfall for a voyage that began in a city designated a UNESCO Heritage site, a voyage on a tall ship through waters traversed by Cartier and Cabot, Cook and Champlain, a voyage that led us through history itself.

After nearly two days of riding our vessel like a bronco buster in a rodeo we had achieved flat waters. The seas had calmed in Newfoundland's lee. *Concordia* seemed to be floating in a place without time, a place without borders or limits. That morning the call went out, muffled in the fog, but intelligible. "Stand by to furl sails." And we set to work, muscles screaming one last time.

We were in the waters of the Bay of Islands. The fog broke suddenly just as



we furl the last sail, revealing a vista beautiful enough to make a marine cry. We stood on the decks silently as the boat glided between these behemoths. This was the most spectacular scenery of any so far, still shrouded in mist, a pristine setting that reminded you of creation itself.

A green rock sprouted from the sea off our port side, climbing 2,000 feet into a swath of fog. A sudden bay opened up, unveiling a procession of stark mountains. A lone white lighthouse huddled 50 feet above the waterline, at the base of a cliff that rose straight up more than 1,000 feet. A waterfall cascaded down a steep slope. White spray plummeted from granite cliffs. It crashed into the sea beside rock-strewn beaches.

This was landfall and it felt like the beginning of history itself. This was the perfect completion to our voyage through time.

History comes alive at the Citadel, a fortress overlooking Quebec City, above. Children cool off in a river west of Havre St. Pierre on Quebec's eastern shores, top.



Canadian Sailing Expeditions offers a variety of vacations on both coasts and the Caribbean that are unique in terms of destinations, shipboard experiences and the vessels themselves. For more information, call (877) 429-9463 or log on to [www.canadiansailingexpeditions.com](http://www.canadiansailingexpeditions.com).